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The concrete and the abstract in the language of politics

John E. Joseph, University of Edinburgh

ABSTRACT

Until well into the modern period, *concrete* was used to mean what is now called *abstract*. The terms originated as grammatical descriptors for related pairs of nouns and adjectives, then came to be reinterpreted as logical categories tied to the presence or absence of a clear mental image. They remain ambiguous, yet are used as though every word fell clearly into one or the other category. This assumption is found in numerous fMRI studies of language functions in the brain, rendering their conclusions questionable. Mid-20th century critiques of political language (Ogden & Richards, Orwell) focussed on how ‘abstract’ language enables governments to deceive and control ordinary citizens, and current political rhetoric continues the tradition. This article proposes taking abstract and concrete not as semantic properties of words but as aspects of how words are used, and reimagining their link to thought processes along subtler lines.

KEY WORDS: abstract, concrete, language, politics, Orwell, post-truth

1 Defining *abstract* and *concrete*

A recent posting about the “post-truth politics age” is not the first to invoke the venerable distinction between the abstract and the concrete:

In this new frontier, policy plans – let alone the nuance underpinning them – are superseded by abstract promises masquerading as concrete deliverables. (Gaston 2016)

What exactly the words *abstract* and *concrete* mean here is hard to pin down, even if one understands the thrust of the sentence. The “concrete deliverables” are a “masquerade”, meant to convey empty “abstract promises” to an electorate no longer able or willing to attend to the nuances of policy that once upon a time informed their political choices. Gaston’s political position will be laid out more fully in the final section. My aim is neither to endorse it nor question it, but to consider appeals made to the abstract and the concrete here and across a range of contexts.

The most widely read work on politics and language of modern times, certainly in the English language and perhaps universally, is not a learned treatise but a novel. George Orwell wrote *Nineteen eighty-four* (1949) with satirical intent, yet the vision of society that it put forward was so acutely true to what its readers were experiencing around them that it was received as a dystopian nightmare, more Kafkaesque than Swiftian. The idea of Newspeak, the engineered language through which the government of Orwell’s Oceania controlled the minds of the citizenry, hit home with a readership who had just been through a propaganda-laden war, and who now lived in a dictatorship, an empire or a democracy entering the grip of Cold War paranoia.

The novel’s appendix “The principles of Newspeak” explains that this language “was intended only to express simple, purposive thoughts, usually involving concrete objects or physical actions”.

Newspeak did include some “very abstract words such as *if* or *when*”, but abstractions in the usual sense had been eliminated. For example,

The word *free* still existed in Newspeak, but it could only be used in such statements as ‘This dog is free from lice’ or ‘This field is free from weeds’. It could not be used in its old sense of ‘politically free’ or ‘intellectually free’ since political and intellectual freedom no longer existed even as concepts, and were therefore of necessity nameless.

The ongoing aim was to reduce the vocabulary steadily, so as “to *diminish* the range of thought”, and “to make all other modes of thought impossible” apart from “the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc”, or English Socialism.

Countless other words such as *honour, justice, morality, internationalism, democracy, science, and religion* had simply ceased to exist. A few blanket words covered them, and, in covering them, abolished them. All words grouping themselves round the concepts of liberty and equality, for instance, were contained in the single word *crimethink*, while all words grouping themselves round the concepts of objectivity and rationalism were contained in the single word *oldthink*. Greater precision would have been dangerous.

Three years earlier, Orwell had written what has become the most widely read non-fiction article on the topic in English, “Politics and the English Language” (Orwell 1946). Prominent among its targets was a book entitled *The tyranny of words* (Chase 1938) by an American author attached to a movement called General Semantics, aimed at clearing out irrational residue in language that was thought to get in the way of logical thinking (see Joseph 2002). For Chase, as for C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards in *The meaning of meaning* (1923), abstract words presented a particular danger. For Orwell, however, Chase’s distrust of abstract terms presents a still greater danger: *fascism*, for example, is an abstract term, one that Chase’s scepticism would dismiss as a mere verbal phantom – and in so doing, make it impossible to combat.

Stuart Chase and others have come near to claiming that all abstract words are meaningless, and have used this as a pre-text for advocating a kind of political quietism. Since you don’t know what Fascism is, how can you struggle against Fascism? (Orwell 1998 [1946]: 428-430)

The ‘quietism’ was not a figment of Orwell’s interpretation: Chase was a Quaker, a member of the Religious Society of Friends, a sect whose tradition of pacifism has been joined from the beginning to a determination to reform language.

Despite his rejection of Chase’s scepticism toward abstractions, Orwell argues in the same article in favour of language that starts from ‘concrete’ images, maintaining, in line with Ogden and Richards, that keeping objective reality as one’s fixed anchor is the best guarantor that what one says or writes will be true, rather than self-serving, and that will put the hearer or reader in the best position to judge the validity of the statements they encounter. This faith in the concrete is a residue of Orwell’s erstwhile commitment to the Marxist doctrine of a base that is objectively grounded in class struggle. Orwell’s article locates ‘real’ language in the working class, and abhors middle-class standard English as a tissue of ready-made collocations disconnected from the soil.

What is above all needed is to let the meaning choose the word, and not the other way about. [...] When you think of a concrete object, you think wordlessly, and then [...] hunt about till you find the exact words that seem to fit it. When you think of something abstract you are more inclined to use words from the start, and unless you make a conscious effort to prevent it, the

existing dialect will come rushing in and do the job for you, at the expense of blurring or even changing your meaning.

In *Nineteen eighty-four*, only the Proles, who continue to use Oldspeak, retain some ability to think for themselves. Newspeak is the endpoint of the development of the 'Standard English' that Orwell associates with the middle and upper classes (particularly readers of *The Times*), a language of abstractions, artificial in their loss of connection to the tangible, concrete world.

But what exactly are abstract and concrete words? For Ogden, Richards, Chase, Orwell and probably most people since, concrete words refer to things that can be seen and touched, and abstract words to concepts. Concrete language is about concrete things, and abstract language is about abstract concepts and ideas. Bodies and brains can be seen and touched, minds cannot, so it seems to follow that the former are concrete, the latter abstract, and that this is equally true of the words that designate them. However, complexities rear their heads from the start.

2. Abstract and concrete in the brain

The last sentence says that complexities 'rear their heads'. That is a concrete image, with a subject that, however abstract it may be, does not actually have a head to rear. Obviously we are dealing with a metaphor, yet if metaphor means that abstract and concrete language can slip so easily into one another, how robust is the distinction between them? Enough to sustain purported evidence of their different cerebral localization? There has been considerable interest in this topic among neurolinguistic researchers since the 1980s, with a notable upswing in the last dozen years (see e. g. Noppeney and Price 2004; Whatmough et al. 2004; Sabsevitz et al. 2005; Romero Lauro et al. 2007; Christoff et al. 2009; Desai et al. 2010; Borghi et al. 2011; Pecher et al. 2011; Rodríguez-Ferreiro et al. 2011; Scorolli et al. 2012; Sakreida et al. 2013). Using fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) scans, the studies have revealed different patterns of cerebral activity in the processing of concrete and abstract words, yet have not turned up the same results in terms of locality. Where Sabsevitz et al. (2005) typifies studies showing an association between abstract language and activity in the left superior temporal and inferior frontal cortex, Whatmough et al. (2004) have found the opposite, with concrete activity on the left side and abstract on the right.

Conspicuous by its absence in this research is any suspicion that the concepts of concrete and abstract in language might themselves be less than straightforward. The studies define concrete words as those that conjure up a mental image, while abstract ones do not, and most of the research is based on measuring response time connected to the assumed mental imaging process. Yet an examination of the word lists used raises serious questions about meaning and context. For example, Sabsevitz et al. (2005) include the following 'abstract' words in their study:

prank	treaty	news	battle
job	injury	plan	asset
riddle	labour		

But English speakers to whom I have shown their lists picked these words out as concrete, and found other categorizations in the study to be ambiguous. Sabsevitz et al. (2005) align concreteness with

‘imageability’. Yet my mental image of a horse is a single instance of a vast category, and I have one of these for a battle as well:



If imageability is the criterion, some people hearing the word *injury* might imagine a wound that they have seen, or had inflicted on them; for *asset*, something they own; and so on, unpredictably and with vast variation – just as images of a dog will vary from a chihuahua to a Great Dane, or the stuffed dog someone loved as a child, or Spike from the Tom and Jerry cartoons, or of two people ‘dogging’, or even an image of the written word *dog*.

Other researchers have used whole verb phrases rather than single words. Sakreida et al. (2013) examine the brain activity of 25 people responding to combinations of “96 German nouns – 48 (concrete) graspable objects and 48 (abstract) non-graspable entities – and 96 German verbs – 48 (concrete) motor verbs and 48 (abstract) non-motor verbs”. The aim is to test whether embodied cognition theories in psychology are right to maintain that “during language comprehension an internal simulation of the content of the word or sentence occurs”. This predicts that the areas of the brain involved in motor functions should be activated during the reading of motor verbs such as *draw* (as opposed to *marvel at*) and nouns denoting graspable objects such as *butterfly* (as opposed to *sunset*).

The 25 subjects were shown the phrases (*grasp a butterfly*, *grasp a sunset*, *marvel at a butterfly* etc.) on a screen, and instructed to push a button as quickly as possible if the phrase involved an action of the hand or foot. The results showed that “processing of both concrete and abstract language content is crucially supported by the sensorimotor neural network” (*ibid.*), but also that

Processing of concrete compared to abstract multi-word content predominantly employed a fronto-parietal network, which is a well-known circuit for object perception and manipulation ([...]). This shows that this network could also be activated by reading nouns that refer to graspable objects, which might reflect the possible nature of the interaction with the object. Conversely, processing of abstract noun-verb combinations compared to concrete language content showed a pronounced activation in the left anterior middle temporal gyrus. Crucially this area is close to the language processing system ([...]). (*ibid.*)

The graspability criterion for concreteness obviously differs from imageability, and raises problems of its own. Whatever abstract concepts are, the sensation of ‘grasping’ one is palpable, making it more than metaphorical; whereas butterflies are commonly spoken of as eluding one’s grasp. Marvelling at either a sunset or a butterfly necessarily and directly involves the sensorimotor system. In any case, the authors themselves describe the role of fronto-parietal network as “object

perception and manipulation”, in other words both the sensory and motor components of sensorimotor. A more immediate methodological question is whether a response by hand movement to words chosen according to whether they involve hand (or foot) movement might not produce different results from an oral response. My point, however, is simply to show some of the many forms that the abstract-concrete distinction takes in current research.

3 The origins of *abstract* and *concrete*

Linguists, rhetoricians and teachers of writing all apply a distinction between the concrete and the abstract in their analysis of words, and even of grammatical features such as verb moods and tenses. Philosophers apply the abstract-concrete distinction to concepts, and psychologists to ways of thinking. In all three disciplines the dyad is treated as so basic, so obvious, as not to need defining or even much reflection. The result is that linguists, philosophers and psychologists are largely unaware of how inconsistently they understand and deploy these terms, across fields and within them. Sometimes (not always) a core agreement over prototypical cases can be detected, yet looking back in time we find that some of today’s prototypical concrete words were yesterday’s prototypical abstractions, and vice-versa, as will be seen in §4.

The question of what distinguishes abstract from concrete concepts and words has been approached in a variety of ways. Some approaches are grounded in beliefs about what the world is like (whether, for example, ‘the good’ exists), others in beliefs about our ability to know what it is like, or to picture it to ourselves. Some take linguistic signs as independent of things in the world, others as moulded by the structure of the world they represent.

The various perspectives on words are messily intertwined with philosophical positions about metaphysics, positions which continue to reflect mediaeval debates about whether categories exist in nature or are human inventions. These positions – realism and nominalism, plus a range of intermediate ones such as conceptualism – had religious ramifications that most present-day philosophers are loath to discuss. Their reticence allows these positions to continue exerting a certain power beneath the surface.

The history of the abstract-concrete dichotomy is complex, largely because of the ambiguity of *concrete*. This ambiguity goes back to the word’s origin, as Latin *concrētus*, literally ‘grown together’ (the past participle of the verb *concrēscere*). It was sometimes used simply to mean that two things were joined into one, an example being the word *concrēscere* itself, where the prefix *con-* ‘together’ was ‘concreted’ with the root *crēscere* ‘grow’. More usually, it denoted a particular type of ‘growing together’, namely when solids form out of a liquid, for instance when curds are formed from milk, or when blood congeals.

The two meanings overlap, but remain separate. Both the general one of two things joining, and the particular one of joining by curdling or congealing, involve things coming together to form something different from either of the original ingredients. But whereas the general meaning says nothing further about the nature of what results, the particular (and more common) meaning specifies that mixing the ingredients makes them solidify. Indeed the particular meaning focusses on that solidity so tightly that the original sense of ‘growing together’ fades from view.

The general and particular senses of *concrete* came into English and the other modern European languages in the Renaissance, initially through translations of Latin writings. Cicero's *De natura deorum* (On the nature of the gods) contains an example of each of the two meanings. Cicero writes that the nature of an animal is either *simplex* 'simple' or *concreta*, concrete in the sense of 'compounded' (*De natura deorum* III.13-14). It is simple if it is made only of one element – earth, fire, air or water – and concrete if from two or more. This is *concrētus* in its general sense. In the same text we find the word with the particular meaning 'firm or solid matter'. Cicero says that "the gods have a certain figure that has nothing concrete, nothing solid, nothing of express substance, nothing prominent in it, but that is pure, smooth and transparent" (*De natura deorum* I.27, Thomas Francklin trans., 1829, p. 41). The separateness of the two meanings can be seen in the fact that the previous passage gave no indication that the nature of an animal involves any solidity or hardness, and this passage has no suggestion that the solidity which the gods lack is something compounded.

Like *concrete*, *abstract* came into the modern languages from Latin: *abstractum*, past participle of *abs-trahere* 'drag away', 'deduct', and in mediaeval Latin, also 'summarize'. Thomas Aquinas, writing in Latin, described the language of angels as entirely 'abstracted' from time and space (*Summa theologiae* §1.107.4 = Aquinas 1889: 492). Forms of the word appear in English and French about a century earlier than *concrete*, and mainly in intellectual rather than practical contexts, although sometimes, particularly in Scots, 'abstract' is found in the sense of 'take or move someone or something away', 'withdraw' or 'steal'. Its intellectual senses had to do with extracting a passage from a larger text, or abridging or summarizing it; or else with leaving something aside from consideration ('abstract something away'). This last sense led to the modern one, found in English from the start of the seventeenth century:

To formulate (an idea, concept, etc.) by isolating the intrinsic properties of something or common characteristics of a number of diverse things, without reference to the peculiar properties of any particular example or instance; to consider (something) in the abstract, independently of its associations or attributes, or separately from something from which it is not physically separable. (*OED*, sense 5a)

This is, in effect, what all words do: designate a concept without reference to the peculiar properties of any particular example or instance. Arguably, there are degrees: words that designate things in the physical world (e.g. cats) are less 'abstracted' from real properties than are words designating purely conceptual things (e.g. democracy); and proper nouns may be at one end of a spectrum with *democracy* at the other end and *cat* in the middle. But what then do we say about the names of *fictional* people or places? Concrete or abstract? As noted earlier, this way of conceiving abstraction is connected to mediaeval philosophical positions.

4 Concrete and abstract adjectives and nouns

In no surviving ancient or mediaeval text does the word *concrētus* appear in the context of how sand, lime and a binding substance can be compounded, as it was by the ancient Romans, to form the solid material which we designate in English by the noun *concrete*. Mediaeval grammarians, when using *concrētus* in its simple sense of 'compounded', showed no sign of worry that it risked being misunderstood as implying congealing or hardening. The term found an important place in

grammatical analysis, to denote a word designating, not a thing, but some *quality* of a thing that is expressed in conjunction with it – ‘concreted’ to it – such as *white* in *white horse*, or *black* in *black bile* – what we now call an adjective (etymologically, ‘thrown onto’ it). The *Oxford English dictionary* (OED) cites:

1657 J. Smith [*The*] *Myst[erie of] Rhet[orique Unveil’d]*. Avijb, The concrete signifies the same form with those qualities which adhere to the subject: The concrete is the Adjective.

The words *horse* and *bile* were ‘substantives’ (*sostantivo* is still used for ‘noun’ in Italian), denoting substances or something substantial. Any particular quality of a substance might be concreted to it in a phrase, hence the association of concrete with adjectives.

However, ‘concrete’ was not exactly equivalent to ‘adjective’. By the early eighteenth century we find concreteness being extended to those substantives seen as implicitly containing an attribute, with the no doubt ironically intended choice of examples being *fool*, *knave* and *philosopher*:

1725 Watts *Logic* I. iv. §5 Concrete terms, while they express the quality, do also either express, or imply, or refer to some subject to which it belongs... But these are not always noun adjectives... a fool, a knave, a philosopher, and many other concretes are substantives.

(‘Noun adjective’ = adjective, as opposed to ‘noun substantive’.) When Watts says that concrete terms express, imply or refer to some subject, we see the particular sense of concrete (‘solid’) beginning to affect the philosophical-grammatical use of the term in what has heretofore been its general sense (‘adhering’). By 1725, the association of concrete with solidity is strong enough that the notion of adjectives being concrete requires some defence.

The balance of applications of ‘concrete’ would continue to shift from adjectives to nouns. By the mid-nineteenth century, concreteness was associated with things, and abstractness with attributes of things, reversing the polarity of two centuries earlier.

1846 Mill *Logic* I. ii. §4 A concrete name is a name which stands for a thing; an abstract name is a name which stands for an attribute of a thing.

(J. S. Mill uses *name* in the sense of ‘noun’.) In the noun phrase *black bile*, the seventeenth century saw *black* as the concrete word, because the quality or attribute *black* is concreted to the substantive *bile*. The nineteenth century and after sees *bile* as the concrete word because it denotes a substance, rather than a quality or attribute.

This confusion goes back to the book that initiated the modern discourse on the abstract-concrete dichotomy, John Locke’s *Essay on human understanding* (1690), which contains a chapter headed “On abstract and concrete terms”. Locke worried deeply about how people misunderstand, and how language can be used so as to improve their understanding of one another and therefore (since teaching requires communication) of the universe. For Thomas Aquinas four centuries earlier, error and lying certainly mattered, but as fundamentally spiritual rather than linguistic concerns.

Abstraction is a key concept within Locke’s account of language and epistemology. The concrete, on the other hand, only gets a few mentions, and while Locke puts it into contrast with the abstract he gives no definition of what he means by *concrete*. This is ironic, since the thrust of the *Essay* is to

prevail upon users of language to define their terms clearly; the likely explanation is that what *concrete* meant to Locke was unambiguous, and did not require definition. The poetically just outcome is that readers of the *Essay* could interpret what Locke meant by *concrete* however they already understood it, whether that was in its grammatical sense of ‘compounded’, making it closely associated with adjectives, or its wider sense of ‘solid’ and perceptible by the senses.

The grammatical sense is supported by Locke’s examples of abstractions as nouns such as *whiteness* which denote what Locke calls “simple ideas”, ideas that come directly from the senses. Simple ideas, Locke maintains, “have all abstract, as well as concrete names: the one whereof is (to speak the language of grammarians) a substantive, the other an adjective; as whiteness, white; sweetness, sweet”. *White* and *sweet* are ‘concrete’ in the grammarian’s sense because of how they get compounded with substantives; but also in the later philosopher’s sense, because they are qualities directly experienced by the eye and the tongue. It is from these concrete qualities that the mind abstracts the ideas of whiteness and sweetness, which are not experienced directly in themselves, separately from white things and sweet things. Locke affirms that the same is true with complex ideas such as *justice*, *just*, and with most relations, such as *equality*, *equal* – but “some of the concrete names of relations, amongst men, chiefly are substantives; as *paternitas*, *pater*”.

Locke maintains moreover that “as to our ideas of substances, we have very few or no abstract names at all”, which he takes as evidence that mankind “have no ideas of the real essences of substances, since they have not names for such ideas [...]. And therefore, though they had ideas enough to distinguish gold from a stone, and metal from wood; yet they but timorously ventured on such terms, as *aurietas* and *saxietas*, *metallietas* and *lignietas*, or the like [...]”. These four words are the absurd abstract nouns corresponding to the concrete nouns *gold*, *stone*, *metal* and *wood* – suggesting that the concrete is more fundamental, and the abstract derived from it.

5 Abstract and concrete in the twentieth century

In a range of fields that bordered on and shared territory with linguistics, the abstract-concrete dichotomy had grown in salience starting in the 1920s. One of the works responsible for this was Ernst Cassirer’s widely-read *Logic of symbolic forms* (1923-29). While we could not ascribe to any single source a shift that seems to have been going on simultaneously across psychology, medical psychiatry, sociology, anthropology and philosophy, Cassirer’s work was much cited in the latter two domains, and not ignored in the others. Cassirer put forward a narrative of human development, in the individual and the species, as an evolution from the concrete thinking we share with animals to the abstract thinking that language enables. He did not however take a simplistic view of the concrete as something objectively real, and the abstract as an artificial overlay, but was enough of a phenomenologist to acknowledge that the ‘objectively real’ is not directly knowable.

Another work that was starting to be read widely in the 1920s, however, cut the legs out from beneath the abstract-concrete dyad. In the *Cours de linguistique générale*, posthumously assembled from lectures given by Ferdinand de Saussure between 1907 and 1911 and published in 1916, the linguistic sign is presented as the conjunction of a signifier and a signified, both psychological rather than physical: the signifier is a sort of mental ‘sound pattern’ rather than an uttered sound, and the signified is, not a thing, but a concept (see Joseph 2012). The signified might or might not

correspond to a 'thing' in the world, but Saussure took it to be the job of psychologists and philosophers to study such correspondences, whereas the expertise of a grammarian, as he usually described himself, was limited to what happens within language only. Signifiers and signifieds are 'values', generated purely by their difference from all the other signifiers and signifieds in the same language system (or at least those with which they share an associative or syntagmatic relationship). Conceived of in this way, no signified is more or less 'abstract' or 'concrete' than any other; all share exactly the same nature, as values generated by difference. The idea of 'abstract' and 'concrete' words has to do with the relationship between the sign and the world outside language.

Interesting in this regard are the two strong rejections of Saussure's model of the sign that took place in the 1920s. In the USSR, Marxist linguists, led by V. N. Voloshinov (1929), denounced Saussure's 'abstract objectivism', by which they meant his failure to see that the linguistic sign contains the reality of class struggle within it (see Joseph 2006). In the UK, Ogden and Richards rejected Saussure's model of the linguistic sign precisely on the ground that it allowed no anchoring in a 'referent', the third point in their 'triangle' of meaning, which grounds the signified in the real and thereby makes it safe for rational thought and discourse.

Unfortunately this theory of signs, by neglecting entirely the things for which signs stand, was from the beginning cut off from any contact with scientific methods of verification. De Saussure, however, does not appear to have pursued the matter far enough for this defect to become obvious. (Ogden and Richards 1923: 8)

They had spotted correctly that, in Saussure's model, all words are 'abstract' by their definition of the term. The point of departure for their book *The meaning of meaning* was the belief that the Great War was the result of the deliberate manipulation of words such as *freedom* and *democracy* by European governments determined to rally their populations to take up arms. For Ogden and Richards, Saussure's model of the sign was self-negating: if the meanings of words are cut off from things in the world, there is no possibility of verifying whether or not anything anyone says is true, starting with Saussure's own statement.

In the 1930s they would be joined by anti-Fascists such as Chase, who likewise saw language that was abstract in the sense of being referent-less as a powerful vehicle of propaganda, against which the unenlightened would be defenseless. Chase (1938: 14) asserts that:

[I]t is doubtful if a people learned in semantics would tolerate any sort of supreme political dictator [...]. A typical speech by an aspiring Hitler would be translated into its intrinsic meaning, if any. Abstract words and phrases without discoverable referents would register a semantic blank, noises without meaning. For instance:

The Aryan Fatherland, which has nursed the souls of heroes, calls upon you for the supreme sacrifice which you, in whom flows heroic blood, will not fail, and which will echo forever down the corridors of history.

This would be translated:

The blab blab, which has nursed the blabs of blabs, calls upon you for the blab blab which you, in whom flows blab blood, will not fail, and which will echo blab down the blabs of blab.

The 'blab' is not an attempt to be funny; it is a semantic blank. Nothing comes through.

The words and phrases that Chase categorizes as "abstract" are: *Aryan Fatherland, souls, heroes, supreme sacrifice, heroic, forever, corridors, history*. It seems odd that he includes *corridors* but lets *nursed* and *echo* escape, not to mention all the grammatical 'function' words (articles, prepositions, and all the verbs).

Contemporaneously with Chase and Orwell, Maurice Merleau-Ponty was pushing phenomenology away from its 'transcendental' version as pursued by Edmund Husserl, from whom Merleau-Ponty had taken his initial inspiration, both directly and indirectly through the *Gestalt* psychologists (at least one of whom had been Husserl's student). Merleau-Ponty (1945) located the reality of things in the here-and-now sensual experience of a lived body (*le corps propre*), giving a thing as many realities as there are bodies to perceive it. In the 1950s, Merleau-Ponty would face up to the deep gulf between his phenomenological beliefs and his political commitments to a Marxist establishment unwilling to question its dogmatic conception of the real. Orwell had similarly broken away from his earlier Stalinist allegiances in the 1930s, following his first-hand experience of Soviet treachery when he went to fight in the Spanish Civil War. While both men distanced themselves from the Communist Party political line, Orwell stayed close to the Marxist understanding of reality.

Many philosophers today remain committed to what admittedly seems like a common-sense conception of meaning as starting from things in the world, 'referents' in Frege's term. Stevan Harnad, founder of the journal «Behavioral and Brain Sciences», maintains in an impassioned reply on his website to an article of mine about Saussure (Joseph 2007) that

To ground symbols, to put concrete flesh on their arbitrary bones, be they ever so systematically structured, the symbol system first has to have the direct sensorimotor capacity to categorize the physical objects that its symbols signify – not merely after something has magically reduced them to a symbolic description. (Harnad 2007)

The word where Harnad is hoist by his own petard is not so much *concrete* as *categorize*. The sensorimotor capacity may *perceive*, but has anyone ever claimed that it can categorize? That is 'mental' work, done through what Harnad calls the 'symbol system', and culturally inflected.

Other fields of study have made their own uses of *concrete* and *abstract*. Michel Bréal, the founder of semantics, is typical of linguists and ethnographers who characterized the historical development of the Indo-European language family as a progress from a primitive stage of concreteness toward the abstractions that define civilization:

Were it necessary to say wherein lies the superiority of the Indo-European languages, I should turn neither to the grammatical mechanism, nor to the compounds nor even to the syntax: I believe it to lie in another direction. It consists of the facility of these languages from the most ancient periods of which we have any knowledge, in creating abstract nouns. (Bréal 1900 [1897]: 245)

Psychiatry moved in a parallel direction. In the USSR, Vygotsky and Luria devised a linguistic test for diagnosing schizophrenics, who cannot "see, in a situation concretely described, meanings other and more abstract than those directly signified by the particular words used in describing it" (Vygotsky 1994 [1934b]: 321). These patients displayed what Vygotsky called "the visual, symbolic thinking of

dreams”, as opposed to “the metaphorical, symbolic thinking based on concepts”, adding, in an apparent dig at Freudians, that “The identification of one with the other is without any solid, psychological basis” (*ibid.*). Vygotsky also wrote that in ‘primitive’ languages the word

does not function as the carrier of a concept but as a ‘family name’ for groups of concrete objects belonging together, not logically, but factually. Storch [1922] has shown that the same kind of thinking is characteristic of schizophrenics, who regress from conceptual thought to a more primitive level of mentation, rich in images and symbols. He considers the use of concrete images instead of abstract concepts one of the most distinctive traits of primitive thought. Thus the child, primitive man, and the insane, much as their thought processes may differ in other important respects, all manifest [...] primitive complex thinking and [...] the function of words as family names. (Vygotsky 1962 [1934a]: 72)

Through the continuation of Vygotsky’s work in the West by Kurt Goldstein and others, overuse of concrete language by an individual would come to be the standard diagnostic for certain types of schizophrenia. Many people so diagnosed were subjected to frontal lobotomy (see Joseph, in press).

In his late works, culminating with *Nineteen eighty-four*, Orwell stressed the danger of mind control through language, though the abstract-concrete divide is no longer at the centre of it as in his 1946 article. Yet views similar to his continued to be widely held and taught in English composition programmes.

Gripping, concrete words. Abstract words print no image in the reader’s mind, they are hard to imagine and remember. It is tempting to hide behind abstraction, when you are too lazy to explore the details. [...] Narrow, concrete words are more exact and less judging. If you talk about a *hen*, say hen, not chicken. If you talk about *chicken*, say chicken, not poultry. [...]

No adjectives. [...] Adjectives soften the impact of their noun. Get rid of them. [...] If you feel that you need an adjective, try first to find a more fitting substantive. (Schacherer 2001)

Not only has the Lockean identification of adjectives as maximally concrete been turned around completely, but so has the value once placed on abstraction as the highest development of civilized thought. That was part of the heritage of disillusionment from two world wars which served to prove that civilization was not all it was cracked up to be. Such disillusionment continues from generation to generation.

6 Conclusion

I hope to have established the following points:

- that *abstract* and *concrete* are relative, not absolute, terms,
- that the same word can be abstract or concrete, relative to other words and depending on its context of use,
- that *concrete* has significantly shifted meaning, especially for grammarians, who formerly used it to mean what is now called *abstract*,
- that *concrete* and *abstract* remain ambiguous terms.

By the definition of concrete words as referring to things that can be seen and touched, and abstract words to concepts, *concrete* is concrete when used to designate the building material, but when it is used to describe words or language, it is abstract. When I write an *abstract* of an article or a project proposal, I produce something concrete. A majority of the items included in the lists used in the brain studies cited readily cross categories in this way, and the fact that these studies, published in scientific journals, never even ask what abstract and concrete words are is an indication of how much power the dichotomy exerts.

Returning to the statement by Gaston with which this article began, and quoting it at greater length:

In this new frontier, policy plans – let alone the nuance underpinning them – are superseded by abstract promises masquerading as concrete deliverables. Pledges devised not to respond to an evidence base or policy need, but to a clamour for a very specific, definitive kind of control. A kind of control that is difficult to offer, in practice, without making significant compromises in the policy areas citizens used to hinge their votes on – such as economic growth, or social mobility... But campaigning in this kind of poetry makes it difficult to govern in prose. (Gaston 2016)

Gaston's argument hinges on the idea that "Populists can run fast and free with the truth, but those concerned with the slog of governance, of consensus-building, of evidence and impact, can't be so cavalier". By her analysis, the electorate currently feel "alienated" from "the political representatives and institutions that they previously held to account for making or breaking their fortunes". Hence they are more likely to be swayed by the "abstract promises", or "poetry", of "populists", without questioning, as they would do in less alienated times, the prosaic "evidence and impact".

One can imagine many poets getting upset at the suggestion that theirs is an abstract form of writing inherently geared toward fooling people into betraying their own best interests. The plays of Shakespeare combine poetry with prose, and it is fair to say that, whatever the abstract and concrete may be, they are present in both, as are truth, and in the history plays, much of "the slog of governance". A politician cannot choose between campaigning and governing. To govern, a politician must first get elected, and to get re-elected, he or she must govern to the electorate's satisfaction, or at least not to its dissatisfaction (unless blessed with an unelectable opponent). If the electorate feels alienated, it may be in part because of politicians who have not *spoken* to them. Speaking to them does not mean making a choice between grand narratives and ideographic facts, but rather, as Gaston herself suggests, balancing the two.

Neither does grand narrative equate with abstract, or ideographic facts with concrete. The "evidence" that Gaston evokes reverentially is itself always problematic: is it more true when in the form of a case study – somebody the politician happened to meet in the park on Sunday – or a statistical study of a large population, in which the concrete realities of individual cases have been dissolved into a broth? In which case, are we really dealing with evidence that is more scientific, or just trusting that the various complexities will balance each other out, though knowing that trust in averages is a methodological choice that is neither foolproof nor devoid of consequences, nor separable from broader issues of faith or philosophy that we would prefer not to confront?

Before invoking the term 'post-truth age', we need to ask ourselves when the 'truth age' was. There is a strong chance that it is a Golden Age myth, in other words that the 'truth age' is itself 'post-

truth'. Joseph (2002) discusses the waves of 'propaganda anxiety' that surrounded the two world wars and carried on through the Cold War, taking the form of fear that formerly truthful governments and formerly benevolent companies were now systematically lying to their electorates and customers, aided and abetted by the new broadcast media of radio and television. Noam Chomsky's voluminous writings on 'manufacturing consent' are a continuation of this tradition (see e.g. Herman and Chomsky 1983; also Joseph 2013), resparked by protests over US government deception about the war in Vietnam on university campuses plastered with the slogan "Don't trust anyone over 30". Critical Discourse Analysis came onto the scene in the year Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister (Fowler et al. 1979), and throughout the 1980s took its *raison d'être* to be exposure of the systematic lies of the Conservative Party and the newspapers that supported it, along with those of the Reagan government in the USA. This was followed by a decade and a half of 'spin' politics, which, together with the financial crash of 2008 and government responses to it that were widely portrayed as less than honest, contributed to the voter alienation described by Gaston.

The term 'post-truth age' makes little sense if there has never been a 'truth age' – a term no one uses, perhaps because its scientific naïveté is so transparent. The truth age is a concept that belongs to the domain of religion, or at least to a Platonism that, in the view of Popper (1945), must inevitably struggle to accept the diversity of opinion within an 'open society', just as Plato rejected the democracy of his native Athens in favour of his imagined Republic ruled by a philosopher-king. When post-truth is used to suggest that we are in a period of emotional as opposed to rational choice by electorates – that voters care more about candidates appearing to be sincere in their convictions than whether they have precise command of factual details – it is again naïve to suppose that this is something new. Aristotle's rationale for his *Rhetoric* was that we need to understand the linguistic mechanisms through which others try to manipulate our choices in their own interests, as much by emotional as by logical means. What is more, over the last three decades philosophers and psychologists have given much effort to breaking down the distinction between reason and emotion, now generally taken to be a false and counter-productive distinction; and their efforts have percolated into everyday discourse, with concepts such as 'emotional intelligence'.

In showing the historical changes and confusions that have left their traces in the concrete-abstract distinction, my aim has not been to tear it down. Rather, I hope to have offered a road map that may help to lead to a more nuanced version of the distinction for use in the analysis of the language of politics, a version in which words are not taken to be inherently abstract or concrete. In relative terms, it may sometimes be useful to describe a given word as more abstract than another, but ultimately it is how the words are *used* that can be characterized meaningfully as abstract or concrete. By the time of his last novel, Orwell had come to see this, in its application to political language. It is however an understanding that needs continually to be rediscovered and reasserted, particularly since the dyad of abstract and concrete, like that of prose and poetry, has such a strong metaphorical grip on our linguistic imaginations, whether we are politicians, voters, political analysts, novelists, poets, philosophers, linguists, psychologists or brain scientists.

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